

Book Review: 'Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew' by Prof. Bart Ehrman

By Prof. Bart Ehrman

Reviewed by Ijaz Ahmad

To the victor go the spoils

Millions of people worldwide consider the New Testament to be the true word of God. However, recorded history tells a somewhat different tale of forgeries, debates, and a countless exchange of derision. How exactly did this New Testament come about? Who wrote it and who put it together? Was the New Testament agreed upon by all Christians? Bart D. Ehrman illustrates the world of Christianity in the first three centuries after the death of Jesus Christ leading up to the formation of what we today know as the New Testament in his book “Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew.”

The book itself is conveniently organized to tell a story utilizing factual evidence (for the most part). The book is divided into three parts. The first part explores different written texts and works that didn't make it into the New Testament. The second part focuses on the forms of Christianity that eventually disappeared and became “lost.” These forms were declared heretical by the ‘proto-orthodox’ Christians (those Christians whose beliefs became the mainstream beliefs of Christianity). The third part explores the rise of the ‘proto-orthodoxy’ and the eventual formation of the New Testament and Christianity.

The Lost Scriptures, that Never Made It

Ehrman explores various written works and Gospels that were never included into the canon (a collection of written works) of the New Testament. The Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Thomas are just a few of the numerous other written works that some early forms of Christians believed in. The book presents an overview of what these early written works discussed and why they weren't included in the canon of the New Testament.

The Gospel of Peter was a widely acknowledged book by many in the first two centuries of Christianity. It was viewed as extremely intolerant of Jews and forgiving of Pilate. It states that after the crucifixion, Pilate washed his hands and regretted what had been done while the Jews did not. Moreover, this Gospel discusses a form of the apocalypse similar to other apocalyptic gospels. Nevertheless, this Gospel was revered as some early Christians as sacred scripture and they followed its teachings. The author is believed to be Simon Peter as it says “But I Simon Peter and Andrew my brother took our nets and went to the sea (v. 60).” However, based on the time period in which this

was written it becomes evident that it must have been written after the death of Peter, which was probably around 64 CE. Thus the author could not have been Peter and the book was thus forged in his name.

Many other writings were declared as forgeries, which wasn't uncommon in that time period. The Gospel of Thomas contains many similarities with the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. When you delve deeper, you find that Matthew and Luke "have a number of additional passages almost entirely made up of sayings that are not found in Mark." Historians have attributed these similarities to the notion that Matthew, Luke, and subsequently Thomas could have acquired certain ideas from another gospel, labeled as Gospel 'Q' (for *Quelle*, which in German means 'source'). Further studying of the Gospel of Thomas revealed that it wasn't written by Didymus Judas Thomas, Jesus' twin, as was believed. The author isn't known but the writing is obviously forged in Thomas's name.

Other writings were viewed as possibly incorrect due to excessive copying over the years, which could eventually lead to mistakes. Ehrman even writes in his book that "the earliest copyists appear to have been untrained and relatively unsuited to the tasks; they made a lot of mistakes, and these mistakes were themselves then copied by subsequent copyists...down to the Middle Ages." This assumption is based on the discoveries of early copies of the New Testament which don't complement other later copies, which can be explained by poor copying.

Eventually, when the canon of the New Testament was being put together, it was decided that these specific written works would not be included due to their lack of authenticity.

The Faiths We Never Knew, with a Pound of Salt

Surprisingly, Christianity was as diversified in the first few centuries as it is now today. There were Christians who believed in one God, or two, or even 365. Ehrman focuses on several key forms of Christianity that existed, which played a key role in determining the mainstream form of Christianity. In particular the Ebionites (followed Jewish Law but considered themselves Christian), Marcionites (Christians who rejected the Jewish law and the Old Testament), and the Gnostics (various different beliefs that focused on the notion of asceticism) are discussed. Other sects are also briefly covered such as the Montanists, who had similar beliefs to the 'proto-orthodox' views but believed that their prophecies superseded and fulfilled the doctrines of the Apostles.

The two extreme ends of the spectrum, the Ebionites and the Marcionites, are discussed in great detail. Interestingly, the only evidence we have on what the Ebionites believed is from their enemies. Occasionally, in letters or other written works, the enemies would quote the scriptures of the Ebionites. But the original scriptures or written works of the Ebionites have not been discovered or have been destroyed. Therefore, speculation on what they believed on the basis of what their enemies say about them is all we have. Ehrman graciously acknowledges this issue and various others as he explores the early history of these Lost Christianities. He writes that "we must base our understanding on the words of their opponents, sometimes taking their claims with a pound of salt."

Based on the written works and understandings of the history, the basic beliefs held by the Ebionites can be determined. The Ebionites were Jews who wanted to maintain Jewish Tradition and Teachings. They viewed Jesus as completely human and not divine and believed in only one God. To the other end of the spectrum lies the Marcionites. The Marcionites were Christians who completely rejected the Jewish beliefs and traditions, including the Old Testament. The founder of this sect of early Christianity was Marcion, who was greatly influenced by the writings of Paul.

The Marcionites held the belief that there wasn't just one God, but two. Moreover, Jesus was seen as completely divine and not human. Their primary scripture was a version of Luke and a few letters of Paul. Their greatest distinction was that they viewed the God of the Jews as inferior and that "a person is made right with God by faith in Christ, not by doing works of the Law."

Another group of emerging Christianity was the Gnostics, who also maintained that there is only one God. There were different forms of Gnosticism, but the general idea was that the material world was an evil one and full of suffering. The only escape was to the spiritual world, which was good and pleasant. They taught that "we can escape this world and all that it holds; we can return to our heavenly home; we can become united with God, once again, as we originally were." Ehrman discusses how the Gnostic forms of Christianity grew rapidly due to their attractive message. Some Gnostics didn't believe that salvation was achieved through the crucifixion but through the teachings of Jesus. Moreover the Gnostics encouraged the discovery of truth and understanding.

Ultimately, these Lost Christianities vanished into history. They were "seen as a significant threat to the burgeoning proto-orthodox movement" and thus were refuted through numerous written works.

The Rise of the Proto-Orthodox

The first few centuries of Christianity were a collection of numerous beliefs and written works. But, only Proto-Orthodox would remain to be the dominant form of Christianity. Ehrman attributes their victory to steadfastness, obedience, submission,, and willingness to do whatever it takes to survive. The proto-orthodox Christians were willing to give up their lives for their beliefs. Moreover, the introduction of the bishop solidified their leadership standing as they were proclaimed as the final word of God and the church.

The proto-orthodoxy form of Christianity contained such individuals as Ignatius, who encouraged the concept of martyrdom. As he was set for execution by the Romans, he stated in a letter that he doesn't want to be freed and that instead he asked the people to "Allow me to be bread for the wild beasts; through them I am able to attain to God...let them come upon me, only that I attain to Jesus Christ" (Ign. Rom. 4-5). The concept of giving one's life, literally, to their faith was rather attractive and common among the proto-orthodox.

To become the dominant form of anything, religious or not, it is necessary to remain ordered and organized. Thus comes in the bishop. The introduction of the bishop was a huge turning point to establish a firm ground in faith and leadership. Years before the introduction of the bishop, churches

suffered “problems of division, infighting, flagrant immorality, chaotic gatherings, and doctrinal error. A person was required to be in charge to lay down peace and order. Ehrman writes that “each Christian community had a bishop, and this bishop’s word was law. The bishop was to be followed as if he were God himself.” Ignatius was an avid follower of the role of bishop and he writes that “you should do nothing apart from the bishop” (Ign. Magn. 7.1) and “We are clearly obliged to look upon the bishop as the Lord himself” (Ign. Eph. 6.1).

The bishop was the start of the bureaucratic chain that overlooked and maintained a firm foundation of faith across all Churches. This prevented any emergence of ideas or proclamations that could threaten the sanctity of the Church.

The proto-orthodox Christians held on to Scriptures of Judaism, which they believed predicted Christ. However, they simultaneously rejected the practices of Judaism, such as circumcision. Their goal was to be a new unique religion that sprung out from the old. The introduction of the bishop stressed the importance of church hierarchy. The hierarchy, Ehrman says, was “invested with an authority that was used to determine what was to be believed, how church affairs (including worship and liturgy) were to be conducted, and which books were to be accepted as scriptural authorities.” Moreover, the bishop allowed a consistent flow of information to all of the churches so as to allow the bishops to establish their religion as a worldwide communion.

What seemed to be the ultimate weapon for victory, and Ehrman doesn’t specifically discuss this but hints at it, was their massive library of texts, letters, and other written works that refuted the beliefs of the other forms of Christianity. Their consistent attacks and attempts to invalidate other forms of early Christianity is what helped them become the dominant form. It helped to convert other Christians to their form of Christianity.

Since the proto-orthodox form of early Christianity became the dominant mainstream form, their beliefs and system of religious bureaucracy is what governed Christianity for many centuries to come. They could decide what the religion would be like, what was allowed or forbidden, and even what was true and what was false.

A Canon of ‘chosen’ scripture

Throughout the first three centuries after the crucifixion of Jesus, a battle of scriptures and authenticity raged in the Christian world. Thus the idea to collect authentic pieces of writing into a New Testament canon seemed like a logical step towards keeping the religion alive. Athanasius wrote, in a letter to churches in Egypt during the mid-4th century CE, in favor of forming a canon of the current 27 books and no others. He lists all of the books of the Old Testament followed by 27 books to be included in the New Testament. Some Churches, like the church of Ethiopia, accepted his 27 books but included four others. Other churches, such as the church of Syria, excluded certain pieces of writing making it a canon of 22 books.

However, this letter did set in stone the 27 books to be included in the New Testament. Ehrman writes, “The twenty-seven books named by Athanasius are ‘the’ New Testament. Even so, the process

did not come to a definitive conclusion through an official ratification of Athanasius's canon. ... There was no official, church wide pronouncement on the matter until the Council of Trent in the mid-16th century. But by then, the twenty seven books were already 'set' in stone."

Ehrman outlines some of the criteria used to determine which books would be put in the canon and which ones wouldn't. Throughout the years following Athanasius's letter, many church figures and bishops wrote detailing which books could be included and which ones were "spurious," or inauthentic. After exchanging ideas and putting things together, the canon of the New Testament was settled in North Africa towards the end of the fourth century.

The outline of the process of generating the canon of the New Testament was told rather historically by Ehrman. It wasn't meant to discourage or discriminate. Ehrman could have included more details towards the end of his discussion, as he simply just ends his discussion once the first copy of the New Testament is formed. Although the testament was formed, it probably wasn't accepted with open arms by all Christians. Debates ensued in the later centuries and arguments grew heated. These arguments and debates certainly impacted the formation of the New Testament as we see it today. It seems that the discussion on the topic is vast and possibly requires a separate book to catalog the details.

The Lost can be Cherished

The history of early Christianity still remains a great mystery. Much of what remains belongs to the proto-orthodoxy form of Christianity. Very rare finds have introduced us to other minor forms of Christianity that once existed. The remnants of a lost religion are all we have to understand what these people believed and how they once lived.

By piecing together some bits and pieces, we can reflect upon the status of Christians after the crucifixion of Jesus. One can only imagine the horror and fear that many faced. But by studying the history of early Christianity, we find that people of all different backgrounds and walks of life took solitude and comfort in their own religious ways. Upon learning of all the different early Christians, one wonders what the world would be like had the Ebionites become the dominant form. Or even the Marcionites, or some form of Gnosticism. Regardless, the presence of these other early forms of the religion shaped the dominant mainstream form of Christianity. Their teachings, although varied, taught the message of love and peace that people of all religions cherish today.

The author does a fantastic job of keeping his own beliefs and views out of the book. His aim is not to contest the validity of the New Testament although sometimes it may feel as if he's trying to point out that his interpretation is correct. Ehrman is obviously a historian and not a religious individual. He bases his arguments on what evidence exists and sometimes on trends typically observed in history. In the end, this book is not meant to turn people away from Christianity, as Ehrman expresses at the end of the book that it is only meant to provide a "sense that alternative understandings of Christianity from the past can be cherished yet today."